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ABSTRACT

This case study examined the role of parents as decision-makers in the founding of an elementary (K-1) charter school serving 44 children and their families in a California metropolitan area. The study focused on the working relationship between the parents and the founding director, and the effects of this relationship on the organization's functioning. Data were collected through 7 months of participant observation, interviews conducted with staff and parents, and document analysis. Data included: (1) dissension among parents regarding the founding teacher's performance, especially with regard to making decisions unilaterally; (2) negative feelings and beliefs about the regular public schools serving as an anchor in the decision to found the charter school; (3) the powerful role designated for the founding director in the charter school petition; (4) the director's abandonment of a collective structure for a hierarchical decision-making structure; (5) the uniting of parents and staff as they prepared the school site; (6) parental concerns about curriculum and discipline; (7) the lack of a formal grievance procedure; (8) the use of mediation to address parent-director conflict; and (9) parents' lack of knowledge or engagement before the school opened. The study concluded that parents need to take responsibility for making crucial organizational decisions from the beginning and noted that parents and others can learn strategies for making good organizational and educational decisions for their local school. (Contains 25 references.) (KDFB)

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Parents as Partners in the Organization and Development of Charter Schools

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Introduction

This paper investigates the beginning stages, from initial planning through the first seven months of operation, of a small, elementary, "new-start" charter school (hereafter referred to as C-Star) located in a residential neighborhood of a California urban metropolis. C-Star, a non-profit public benefit corporation monitored by and responsible to the local school board, had forty-four children enrolled in one kindergarten class and one first grade class at the time of the study. The paper's primary focus is on the parents as decision-makers in the founding of the charter school. The working relationship between the parents and the founding director, and the effects of this relationship on the functioning of the organization is explored.

In California Senate Bill No. 1448 (1992), the chapter detailing the petition process for charter organizers states that all charter petitions must contain a description of the governance structure of the proposed school that includes, but is not limited to "the process to be followed by the school to ensure parental involvement" (p. 4). Within the first two years of the movement, a small number of charter schools reported conflict between parents and school management (Troubled Charter School, 1994; Dianda & Corwin, 1994). An early survey of California charter schools conducted by Dianda and Corwin for Southwest Regional Laboratory (1994) revealed that teachers in two charter schools were expressing concern, during the first months of operations, that parents would usurp some of their authority. One year later, two California schools reported that "teachers' authority was being eroded by parents' increased influence" (p. 37).

School reform researcher Bruce Fuller (1995) argues that pro-choice policies such as charter schools will place parents in a much more powerful role with school principals and teachers causing them "to behave as market actors--expressing voice within their school districts" (p. 9). If parents become dissatisfied with their charter school and remove their child from the school, the average-daily-attendance monies allotted for that child will be deducted from the charter school's budget. Fuller believes that this threat of exit and loss of funding will increase the leverage of parents, particularly those from lower socioeconomic and ethnic minority groups who traditionally have not had much power in the formal education of their children. An important question to consider is: How will this shift in power affect teachers and administrators in the daily operations of a school?

I begin this paper with a brief overview of charter schools, nationally and in the state of California, to place C-Star's experience in context. I move on to the case study of C-Star and an analysis of factors during the planning and development phases that influenced the organization's overall climate and health toward the end of the first year of operation. I conclude by broadening the scope of C-Star's findings to the overall charter school movement and discuss the implications for parents and educators involved in the grass-roots organization of new-start schools.

Brief history of charter schools

National overview.

Between 1991 and 1997, twenty-five states plus the District of Columbia enacted legislation authorizing some version of charter schools. Deregulated, public schools of choice, charter schools are created through a formal written agreement between a group of parents, teachers, and/or educators and a sponsoring agency, such as a school district or a county board of education. As of December 1996, approximately 500 charter school petitions had been approved across the country.

This new model for public education, according to advocates, provides the opportunity for public schools to be more innovative and responsive to the special needs of students and their families. Charter schools operate under contracts designed by groups of teachers, administrators, parents, community members and/or private corporations. Depending on the individual state laws these contracts, or charter petitions, must be approved by state education agencies, school districts, university, or other designated public institutions. Charter schools can operate as nonprofit corporations or teacher-owned cooperatives; or be conversions of existing schools or brand new entities. In states with the strongest charter school laws, the schools are "exempt from most local and state rules, hire their own staff, determine their own curriculum, receive funding directly from the state, and control their own budgets" (GAO/HEHS-95-42, January 1995, p. 4).

As mentioned previously, the interpretation of the charter school concept from state to state differs substantially, which makes generalization about the schools difficult. However, what appears to lie at the heart of the movement's popularity for the public and for legislators are four issues: "low-cost innovation, accountability, regulatory freedom, and school choice. . . . For financially pressed state policymakers, charters offer a way to keep educational reform and restructuring alive" (Dianda & Corwin, 1994, p. 3).

Although claims of the overall educational innovativeness of charter schools have not yet been substantiated, bipartisan pro-charter legislators and politicians are already proclaiming success, expanding original limits legislated on the number of charter schools in particular states, and appropriating additional monies to support the development of new and existing schools. For example, in 1996 the California State Board of Education waived the original 1991 cap of 100 schools, before conducting formal evaluations on the charter schools already in existence, and administered a federal grant program to further the development and improvement of new and operating charter schools.

Even with the recent wave of popularity, this new choice plan is still causing considerable consternation among many public school officials and union advocates. At one time a strategy championed solely by the political Right, school choice was promoted in the 1950s by Southern conservatives as a means of circumventing the Brown vs. the Board of Education decision of desegregating public schools. It was reconstituted by liberals in the 1960s and 1970s in the form of magnet schools as a means of discouraging upper-middle/income White families from abandoning urban public schools. By the mid-1980s choice advocates were making progress in unhinging the concept from its racialized underpinnings by associating school choice with decentralization and demand-and-supply philosophies that were gaining in momentum in the wider society (Popkewitz, 1991). Tuition vouchers were promoted among low-income, urban White families and families of color who did not have the means to leave inner-city schools struggling under the impact of dwindling public funds and increases in enrollment (Fuller, 1995). It was difficult for vouchers, however, to gain bipartisan, broad-based support because of the opposition's powerful argument that vouchers were a serious threat to the overall concept of free public education. Although charter schools appear to combine strategies and objectives across the evolution of choice that appeal to both liberal democratic concerns and conservative pocketbooks, there is still the underlying concern voiced by educators that charter schools may be the first step toward the privatization of schools.

California.

The California charter-school legislation was signed by the governor in 1992, making it the second state to officially join the movement. The steady growth in popularity of vouchers in the state is cited as a motivating factor for its quick adoption of a charter school law. California voters defeated a statewide school voucher initiative in 1993 by a margin of seventy to thirty percent, but polls demonstrated that the defeat was due primarily to voters not liking the version of school vouchers offered to

them on that particular ballot. A 1993 poll conducted by the Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) revealed that 63% of Californians support the concept of school vouchers, 87% believe that the public schools must be changed, and 61% believe that the public education system is in need of a major, not minor, overhaul. Along ethnic lines, 72% of African Americans reported dissatisfaction with the public schools, compared to 58% of Hispanics, 63% of Whites, and 51% of Asian Americans.

Teachers, educators, parents, community members, and nonprofit organizations can apply for California charter status; and the individual schools may be sponsored by local school boards or county offices of education. To confirm that the educational approaches in the charters are valid, petitioners must secure signatures of 10% of the credentialed teachers in their school district or 50% of the teachers at one of the district's schools. Dianda & Corwin (1994) outline the thirteen provisions that California charter schools must address in their charter petitions:

(a) the school's educational program (i.e., who the school is educating, what it means to be an educated person in the 21st century, how learning best occurs);
(b) measurable pupil outcomes (i.e., skills, knowledge, attitudes specified as goals);
(c) the method(s) by which pupil progress in meeting pupil outcomes will be measured;
(d) the school's governance structure, including, but not limited to, how the school will ensure parental involvement;
(e) employment qualifications to be met by school employees;
(f) the procedures the school will follow to ensure the health and safety of pupils and staff;
(g) the means by which the school will achieve racial and ethnic balance among pupils (representative of the surrounding general population);
(h) admissions requirements, if applicable;

(i) the manner in which annual financial and programmatic audits will be conducted;

(j) the procedures by which pupils can be suspended or expelled;

(k) the manner in which staff will be covered by the State Teachers' Retirement System, the Public Employees Retirement System, or social security;

(l) the public school alternatives for pupils not choosing to a attend a charter school; and

(m) a description of the rights of any district employee to work in a charter school and, subsequently, to return to the district (p. 61).

Involvement of parents in charter schools.

Even though charter schools often demand volunteer hours and service that are far more extensive than parent involvement requirements in most public, private, and parochial schools, charter schools command a fiercely loyal parent constituency. In Dianda and Corwin's 1994 study, twenty-five out of thirty-four California charter schools (converted and new-start schools) reported that parents had more influence than in traditional schools in their district. Seventy-four percent of the charter schools used parents as instructors and over half (56%) reported that parents were required to participate in specified school activities or volunteer for a certain number of hours. In new-start schools, seven of eight reported that parents were heavily involved in educational programming and in five of the eight, parents were directly involved in the development of the charter petitions.

In a more recent study by Southwest Regional Laboratory (1995), researchers Becker, Nakagawa, and Corwin reported that twenty-seven California charter schools out of thirty-four required parents to sign contracts with the schools, at the time of a student's enrollment, outlining specific parental involvement requirements. Thirteen of the twenty-three parent contracts reviewed by SWRL (1995) contained fail-to-comply" clauses. The

penalties include fines and/or expulsion of the student; however, the most common identified consequence was "voluntary parent withdrawal" (p.17). In individual interviews and in group meetings, charter school parents voice their strong support of these mandatory contracts and advocate enforcement of the requirements.

SWRL (1995) researchers posed critical questions concerning the methods used by charter schools (i.e., contracts) to encourage parent participation. They suggested that "to some extent . . . (charter) schools are being organized to exclude students based on a new criterion of undesirability"--with "undesirability" defined as having parents or guardians that are not educationally involved and supportive (p. vii). However, because the majority of charter schools receive no start-up or capital funding and no technical assistance from the government, parents provide a source of labor and services vital to the founding and maintenance of the schools. Parents must also actively discourage absenteeism on their child's part to prevent a deduction in the ADA allowance for the charter school. Because of concerns regarding exclusion, a bill (AB 2737) was introduced in California to prohibit charter schools from requiring parent participation. The bill was vehemently opposed by many charter schools and their advocates and was recently killed in the California Assembly Education Committee.

Charter school advocates argue that it is not only parental contracts and requirements that garner high levels of parent involvement in the movement, but also the visible and active commitment of the schools to the families that they serve (Nathan, 1996). In the SWRL study (1995), 75% of California charter schools (N=28) reported that teachers regularly discuss strategies for involving hard to reach parents, compared to 58% of comparison public schools (N=39). Forty-six percent of the charter schools reported that all teachers provide activity suggestions for parents to do at home with their children, compared to 16% of comparison schools. And fifty-four percent of the charter schools noted that information was sent home regularly to parents explaining school lessons. This practice was reported in only 24%

of the comparison schools. These SWRL findings appear to validate Nathan's (1996) suggestion that charter schools are "doing exactly what nationally recognized authorities on parent and family involvement recommend" and that "charter schools appear to be doing much more than the other public schools to promote parent involvement" (p.152).

Methodology

Data collection.

The fieldwork reported in this paper was conducted over a period of seven months with the researcher volunteering an average of one day per week in the classrooms (total of sixty hours), attending seven after-school staff meetings (twenty hours), six evening parent meetings (fifteen hours), and two board meetings (seven hours). Findings and analysis have been shared and discussed with parents and teachers, with feedback solicited and received from three core staff members and three parents on the board of directors. Data collection techniques were ethnographic in nature and included:

- *Participant-Observation.*

  The researcher assisted teachers with children in the art studio, kindergarten and first grade classrooms. Field notes were recorded during natural pauses and breaks throughout the day. The majority of parent meetings, board meetings, and staff meetings were audiotaped. Only one parent meeting and one staff meeting were not audiotaped; field notes were recorded.

- *Interviews.*

  Staff (N = 5). The core staff includes three paid (kindergarten teacher, first grade teacher/educational leader, and art teacher) and two unpaid members (student teacher and the administrative assistant/chief parent volunteer). Although the administrative assistant had a child enrolled in C-Star, she was placed in the category of staff because of volunteering full-time for the school, and being in attendance at all staff meetings.

Unstructured and semistructured interviews with open-ended questions to allow for personal stories and reflection (Mishler, 1986) were initially conducted with three teachers (art teacher, student teacher, and administrative assistant). These interviews took place on-site or by phone with note-taking being the primary method of record-keeping. In this initial round of interviewing, staff members were selected randomly (availability being the deciding factor).

After this series of exploratory interviews, more formal, structured interviews with questions (Appendix A) concentrating specifically on experiences concerning the planning stage and the first three months of operation were then scheduled with four core staff members (art teacher, first grade teacher/educational leader, student teacher, and administrative assistant). Three interviews were audiotaped and took place off-site. Notes were taken during a series of interviews with the administrative assistant. Two of these interviews were conducted on-site and two were conducted by phone. Only one staff member, the kindergarten teacher, was not formally interviewed due to schedule conflicts and illness. However, more time was spent as a participant-observer in this teacher's classroom (compared to the other classrooms) and an off-site, informal 45-minute conversation was held with her. The teacher requested that the conversation not be audiotaped. Notes were recorded immediately afterward.

Parents (N = 43 families). Unstructured interviews with open-ended questions to allow for personal stories and reflection were initially conducted with four parent volunteers (the total number of parent volunteers fluctuated substantially over the course of the research). These parent volunteers were targeted because of their high degree of participation and interviews took place on-site during school hours; field notes were taken.

Informal interviews were also conducted randomly with fifteen parents on-site during school hours and at parent meetings throughout the research. Notes were taken during these on-the-spot interviews or immediately following the conversations.

Five parents were selected for formal interviewing; three were audiotaped and in two cases, field notes were taken. (Question guide in Appendix B.) These informants were chosen as a result of the initial informal interviews and/or after observing their actions and comments at parent meetings. The selection of parent informants was also influenced by observations of their interactions with the staff during school hours and by comments made by staff members about parents. Parents formally interviewed represented one or more of the following categories:

1) Members of the 'original' founding group;

2) Members that were secondary players in the planning process;

3) Members that were supporters of the educational leader, mid-year of operation;

4) Members that became strong opposers of the educational leader and were demanding her resignation, mid-year of operation;

5) Members that were neutral--those concerned about the educational leader's performance, but not demanding her resignation--mid-year of operation.

- *Documents.*

The operating charter, by-laws, meeting minutes, and weekly 'parent folders' containing current school news and correspondence were reviewed. Local newspaper articles about C-Star and national magazine articles on the overall charter school movement were also reviewed. The operating charters of two other California schools--a converted school within the research site's district and a new-start school outside of the district--were read for comparison purposes. California Senate Bill No. 1448 (charter

schools), California Senate Bill No. 1274 (restructuring initiative) and local school district documents on the charter school approval process were also reviewed.

Data analysis.

The overall approach to the investigation was "recursively sequential" (Smith, 1992), that is, themes and patterns that emerged during inital interviews and observations influenced the steps that followed. The information from initial interviews and observations was the basis for selecting informants for formal interviewing and influenced the types of questions asked. All interviews were transcribed and analyzed with an inductive cross-case method of analysis. Key topics, words, and events were identified and coded, such as (a) parents motivation for becoming involved with the charter school group; (b) trust; (c) charter petition process; and so forth. A timeline was then constructed to identify turning points, benchmarks, and transitions in staff's and parents' feelings and opinions that occurred from the initial planning phase into the first year of operation. Meeting minutes, parents' notes, and newspaper articles that documented events prior to the researcher's entrance to the site were used in addition to informants' interviews to construct the timeline.

Insights and conclusions were shared with informants, other researchers studying charter schools, and with outside individuals involved in the grass roots organization of non-profits, collectives, and other alternative schools. This was an on-going process that helped in the verification of interpretations (i.e., Were participants' behaviors characteristic of collective organizing or specific to parent-as-decision-makers-in-schools?) The dialogue with research colleagues also offered insight into 'where to go next' in the investigative process.

Case Study

Background and demographics.

A small planning group--approximately seven families and one educator--began meeting in the Spring of 1993 to discuss starting

a new charter school. The parents had been recruited by Sara[1], an experienced educator who had been a teacher in the local school district for nine years. Sara's background included teaching teachers at a California college and through various professional development programs. She was also the founder of another school still operating in the Midwest. In addressing the question of why she wanted to organize a new-start charter school, Sara answered that for ten years she had wanted to start another school centered around three curriculum "passions": the art/science approaches of Reggio Emilia, Sylvia Ashton Warner's early reading instruction, and Vivian Gussin Paley's creative story-telling. To recruit families and solicit initial support, Sara asked a friend who headed a local cooperative nursery school if she could address the parents there about starting an alternative elementary school. Out of these meetings the seven families were recruited to work with Sara in establishing the charter school.

The C-Star charter was approved by the local school board in the Fall of 1993 and the school opened its doors in the Fall of 1994. As of March 1995 there were three paid staff members at C-Star: Sara (a Caucasian), the full-time educational leader, first grade teacher, and President of the corporation; Yvonne (a Chinese-American), the full-time kindergarten teacher; and Jill (a Latina), the half-time art teacher. One full-time parent volunteer/administrative assistant, Evelyn (a Caucasian), and a part-time student teacher, Lorraine (a Caucasian), comprise the remainder of the core staff. Parents volunteer as classroom teaching assistants, janitorial and office staff, and members of the C-Star board and committees. The C-Star population includes high, middle and low income groups, with one-half of the youngsters qualifying for a free or reduced-price lunch. One quarter of the children are from single parent households. There are three ESL students and three students from families where another language, in addition to English, is primary in the household. The student population consists of three African American, two Chinese American, three Latino, one Native American, two Russian, eleven Caucasian, and twenty-two mixed-race children.

Appendix C contains a complete description of the ethnic make-up of the mixed-race children.

The physical plant is housed within a previously unused, run-down school building located across the street from a large high school. The portion of the building that is not occupied by the charter school is presently being renovated for use by the school district as an occupational therapy center. C-Star has a four-year lease on its space, which encompasses two classrooms, an art studio, an office, a meeting room/lounge, a small portable, and a fenced-in, asphalt area that serves as a playground for the children. The charter school membership gained access to the site in late July, 1994 after a period of long, difficult negotiation with the school district. The location of the site was far from the inner-city neighborhood desired by the majority of parents, however, after experiencing numerous false leads, the C-Star community was relieved to finally have a home. After spending a frantic, exhausting month of constructing, painting, and furnishing the site, the parents and staff opened the classroom doors to the children in time for the first day of school in September, 1994.

Researcher's introduction to C-Star.

I made contact with Sara (educational leader/first grade teacher) and Jill (art teacher) by letter in October, 1994 and began observing and volunteering in the art studio the first of November. This initial observation period--November until Christmas break--was spent getting to know the children and the major adult players during school hours. No staff, parent, or board meetings were attended nor were formal interviews conducted. It was during this introductory period that I became aware of a pattern in the social groupings of parents as they gathered after school to escort children home. Parents would form distinct groups off to the side of the playground or in a far corner of a classroom. Conversation was marked with hushed tones, angry gestures, and quick glances toward other C-Star members. On three

separate occasions group members ceased their conversation when I or other C-Star members ventured into hearing range.

In January immediately following Christmas break, Sara and Jill informed me about "potentially serious problems" at the school. In separate conversations they reported serious communication problems between the two of them and dissension in the parent community concerning Sara's performance as the educational leader and first-grade teacher. According to Sara, 85% of the parents still supported her at that time and a vocal minority was trying to divide the school. In contrast, according to Jill, "33% of the parents did not want Sara as first grade teacher and a good number of parents were questioning her performance as leader." Jill reported that she and the parents had been under the assumption that the organizational structure of C-Star would be based on a collective model. She believed, when hired, that the staff would make decisions collectively, but came to the realization shortly before school started that this was not the case. Sara had the final say on all issues--from curriculum to purchasing--and seemed unwilling to share power. Jill had approached the C-Star board of directors in October about clarifying this issue and had not yet received an answer. For Sara, the hierarchical structure was logical: She was the professional educator that was the most knowledgeable about the curriculum goals of the school and it was imperative that she be able to exercise her authority as leader in order to keep the school on task.

After talking with several parents informally I found that doubts concerning Sara's qualifications and leadership abilities were experienced long before C-Star opened its doors in September. Parents mentioned that Sara had informed them, early on, that she had had to resign from a school that she founded in the Midwest. Sara had also revealed that she had experienced problems with the school district when she was a teacher at one of the local schools. If these parents had reasons to doubt the chief organizer and educational leader during the initial planning process, why did they enroll their children in the school?

Motivation.

At the first parent meeting attended by the researcher, parents in attendance strongly voiced their mistrust of and negativity toward the public school system as a reason for joining together to form C-Star. Six parents expressed that the charter school was their only alternative to the public schools. As one mother explained,

> (C-Star) seemed like the best alternative of all my alternatives and I didn't WANT it to be terrible. I wanted it to be GOOD. . . so I think I ignored a lot of stuff in the beginning

Parents recalled attending workshops that Sara held in her home during the initial planning stages. The general opinion was that the workshops were not rigorous and did not entail in-depth discussions about curriculum, assessment, discipline, or any other classroom issues. The sessions were "pretty loose" with children running about while parents leafed through books and articles. Parents described feeling "uncomfortable" with Sara's "bossy" manner toward them and their children during these meetings, but the desire to escape the traditional public school system overshadowed doubts and rumors about Sara. One mother, who had serious reservations about Sara's abilities from the very beginning, recalled her feelings and actions on becoming involved with the school:

> I had done my own asking around town, through my own network about what people knew about this woman [Sara] and got all of this, 'STAY AWAY' very early on. So I would disappear. I would periodically just not show up for several months at a time and have no idea at all what was going on with [the planning process], but people would call and keep me informed (.) And, in the meantime, of course, the more you become aware of how horrible the alternatives are [the more willing]

> you [are to] go back to things you never would [have otherwise] . . . The school [my child] was assigned to, her neighborhood school, you know, like they have duck and cover exercises . . . There were the drug runs through the--HEY, she's not going to go to THAT school . . .

This reference position--negative experiences and beliefs about the regular public schools--served as a mental anchor in the decision to join Sara in founding a new school. The risky move of starting a charter school was viewed as a gain by these parents, considering that their only alternative was the public schools (Kahneman & Tversky, 1984.)

The other prime motivator voiced by parents in their decision to join and stay with the charter school group was their desire to be involved in "collective work." They recalled nostagically the excitement they experienced in planning "a learning community" and "envisioning a creative educational alternative together." The parents' sentiments appear to corroborate Swidler's (1979) thesis on the organization of alternative schools in which she posits, "Collective sentiments--feelings of solidarity, identification, and dependence on a group--are the most powerful motives in social life. (However) collective coordination, though it is the goal of virtually all alternative organizations, is fraught with difficulties" (p. 83). As James Davis (1992) points out, groups can offer the diffusion of cost or risk, foster confidence in and commitment to whatever decisions the group makes, and overshadow inadequacies in the decision-making process.

The charter and the bylaws.

The C-Star parents assumed that the organization would be run collectively, but this was actually not the case. Two parents reported that they had questioned Sara, on separate occasions, about the decision-making structure of the school and Sara had answered that the organization would be run "like-a-collective." I asked members of the initial planning group if anyone had pressed for a clarification, and one mother replied:

> . . . whenever there was a question (like that) Sara ALWAYS said, 'Have faith' or 'You need to trust me' . . . she constantly said that to the point where it made me NOT trust her. But it also--when somebody is SAYING that to you it makes it more difficult to continue the question. Or at least it made me--it made it difficult for me.

The governance structure of a charter school is supposed to be outlined in the original charter petition submitted to the local school board for approval. National, state, and local legislation state that parental involvement must be factored into the governance structure of a charter school, but how the organization will ensure this involvement is left to the individual charter school to decide. The section on governance in the C-Star charter, approved by the local school board, reads:

> The teachers, the artist, the pedagogue, if there is one, the parents, and ten artists and other community people will govern the school. So, in the first year, with about 25 children, there will be a board of 25 parents, 1 teacher, 1 artist (on staff) and about 10 members of the community. In subsequent years parents may choose to have a smaller group represent them. Decisions will be made by consensus when possible, and by vote when consensus cannot be reached. Each family with a child in the school shall have one vote, as will each member of the teaching staff and each board member. There must never be enough community members and staff, separately or conjointly, to outvote the parents. That is, the parents, taken as a caucus, can veto any item. We believe that this sharing of power will ensure parental involvement. The parents and staff will write Bylaws to assure the smooth implementation of the Charter. There will be clear provision in the Bylaws for making necessary changes in the organization. The Bylaws will include a description of the relationship between staff, governing body and committees,

and how each group is selected. The school will not open until the Bylaws are established.

A 37-member board seems rather unwieldy, but full parental involvement in and the "collective nature" of the decision-making structure is assured in this document. However, throughout the remainder of the charter petition text, Sara is referred to by proper name nine times as head teacher, curriculum expert, and educational leader for the school. No other C-Star members are mentioned by proper name. By placing the emphasis on one, specific person to lead and chart the direction for the organization, it appears to insure an extremely powerful role for Sara in comparison to the other members of the C-Star community. These weaknesses in the petition point to an important link in the health of the charter school movement: The role of the sponsoring agency in reviewing charter petitions. Although many supporters of charter schools, in general, criticize school districts and community education boards for the 'hurdles' they appear to throw into the path of charter school organizers, sponsoring agencies can assist groups in calling attention to weaknesses in organizational plans, accounting procedures, or assessment protocols.

In the drafting of the C-Star Bylaws, the collective model outlined in the charter petition was abandoned for a more hierarchical structure. According to Sara and Evelyn (administrative assistant) a traditional hierarchical structure was necessary in order for the school to become a non-profit public benefit corporation. There do not appear to be any written documents or meeting minutes as to why the decision was made to organize the school as a nonprofit public benefit corporation. Sara explained to the researcher that the district school board refused to work with a collective and the pro-bono lawyers that C-Star secured to advise them on this matter recommended the format and wording for the Bylaws. The organizational structure outlined in the Bylaws includes:

- The authorized number of directors of the corporation shall be seven (7) until changed by an amendment of the Articles of Incorporation or these Bylaws amending this Section 2 duly adopted by the members. The Board of Directors of this Corporation shall at all times consist of one (1) employee of the Corporation, and a majority of the remaining directors shall at all times consist of Parents who are members of this Corporation.
- Annual and regular meetings may be held without notice.
- The Chairperson of the Board (if there is such an officer appointed) shall, when present, preside at all meetings of the Board of Directors and shall perform all the duties commonly incident to that office. The Chairperson of the Board shall have the authority to execute in the name of the corporation all bonds, contracts, deeds, leases, and other written instruments to be executed by the corporation (except where by law the signature of the President is required) . . .
- Subject to such supervisory powers, if any, as may be given by the Board of Directors to the Chairperson of the Board, the President shall be the general manager and chief executive officer of the corporation and shall perform all duties commonly incident to that office. The President shall preside at all meetings of the members and, in the absence of the Chairperson of the Board, or, if there is none, at all meetings of the Board of Directors, and shall perform such other duties as the Board of Directors may from time to time determine."

The corporate tone and organizational structure described in the Bylaws regenerated a flurry of doubts in the C-Star parent community. One father, who was asked by Sara to participate in the drafting of the Bylaws, expressed his reservations to his wife about "Sara naming herself President of the Corporation" during a meeting he attended with the lawyers. The wife recalled her response to her husband's suspicions:

> Derrick actually had expressed some serious concerns about being involved with (the school) because he DID feel that Sara had not been up front as to what the hierarchical situation was and how that was to be. And I said you know it's a good school--if she needs to, you know, be president (of the corporation) why don't we just let her be and I kind of just blew it off until it actually occurred to me that it was more important than that . . .

The importance of this decision did not occur to the parent until doubts resurfaced after school opened. Another mother, who decided to challenge the approval of the Bylaws at a board meeting, explained her experience:

> . . . once they granted us a charter . . . Sara was pushing people that we had to--in order to be incorporated we had to have officers and we had to have bylaws. So with about 5 days notice I was told that there was going to be a meeting about approving the bylaws and electing the officers. I was like, well, WHO are these people and where are the bylaws? I mean can't we read them ahead of time? . . . I actually managed to get a set of the bylaws about a day before the meeting with a LOT of trouble--really not easy to--I finally got them and came to this meeting . . . I had some specific concrete things that I wanted to put my two cents in about the bylaws . . . I mean I've been involved in a few organizations in my time and I've been involved in helping to write bylaws a few places and these were NONSENSE. These were awful, these were some kind of corporate bylaws . . . Before I came to the meeting I had called Sara and said I didn't understand where these particular bylaws came from. I understood we were trying to create a co-op type organization. At which point that's when she corrected me and said NO, in fact, we were NOT going to have a co-op . . . That was the first to my knowledge . . . there was never time for like a full discussion among the group and it was never clear who the

> group was until school started because people would pull in and out all the time . . . anyway she (Sara) would say things like, you know, we-the most important thing we have to do here is we HAVE to get moving. We've GOT to be incorporated or we can't go back to the school board and get a building and whatever else was dependent on it and this democratic process is standing in our way right now.

Insufficient preparation time in the appointment of officers and the drafting and adoption of the Bylaws later resurfaced as a crucial point that caused parents to accuse Sara of "setting things up so that she controlled the board of directors" and "had the ultimate power." This evaluation of Sara's decision to abandon the collective structure seems to be a product of hindsight bias rather than a reasonable deduction (Hawkins & Hastie, 1990). It appears that the major error in Sara's decision-making was in the overestimation of the probability of conjunctive events necessary to opening the school (Tversky & Kahneman, 1984). The quantity and variety of events that had to take place--after the charter petition was approved--in order for the school to begin operations appears to have generated a high degree of psychological stress for Sara. Drafting of bylaws, hiring staff, recruiting more families, locating and preparing a school site, passing building inspection, and securing insurance are just some of the tasks that charter school parents and staff faced. According to C-Star's student teacher, the first parents that Sara had recruited for C-Star in the Spring of 1993, believed that their children would be attending the new charter school in Fall, 1993. Sara reported feeling "responsible for those parents" who had remained with her through the development process and "guilty" that she would fail them if the school did not open the coming Fall as scheduled. The decision to "push things through as quickly as possible" appeared to be the only solution possible to meet this main objective.

Preparation of the school site.

Shortly after the Bylaws were approved by the school district, a site was finally approved by the local school district for C-Star. Parents and staff received the keys to the run-down building approximately one month before school was scheduled to open. The parents placed their misgivings about the organization on hold and threw themselves into transforming a "construction nightmare" into a creative space for their children. Spirits rose and parents and staff united to prepare the site in time for the first day of school.

The emotional pendulum experienced during this stage of C-Star's development is characteristic of collective organizing in that cycles of enthusiasm and despair are experienced throughout the process. According to Swidler (1979) and Kanter (1972) a sure cure for withdrawal and negativity is the intensification of shared goals which revitalize the emotional bonds in a group. This is illustrated in a quote by one parent who was close to withdrawing from the whole process after the adoption of the By-laws. She fondly recalled the experience of mobilizing to remodel the building:

> And I actually got fired up with enthusiasm. People were painting, creating the space, and that was exciting. . . That was REALLY exciting, to have kids hanging out while their parents were all working. There was no way that you wouldn't get enthused about this.

Swidler warns, however, that these reprieves are often short lived. The pendulum ultimately swings back and divisiveness within the group may occur again, overloading and ultimately paralyzing the organization. "It is therefore imperative that a group have available some mechanism for bringing disagreements out into the open" to prevent this situation from happening (1972, p. 92).

School opens.

The parents and staff met their remodeling deadline and the school doors opened on schedule. Six days later, a parent, after volunteering in the kindergarten class, approached Sara about what she perceived as "a lack of a curriculum plan and no teacher control" in the K-classroom. One first-grade parent recalled that at the time she was "so drained from the physical and emotional task of reconstructing the space" that she didn't really pay attention to this kindergarten parent's criticisms. "Sara was exhausted, too" and the general mood was that it was "much too early to criticize anything." The complaining kindergarten parent felt ignored by Sara, decided to take her issues to the C-Star board of directors, and encountered frustration in trying to have her grievance publicly aired and discussed. Meanwhile, Sara asked other parents to submit written statements refuting the complaining mother's concern and the incident escalated into a tug-of-war ending with this particular family leaving the school by October. Not long after this family departed, questions and criticisms concerning curriculum and discipline started surfacing among some of the parents about the first-grade classroom. These concerned parents also found Sara to be resistant to their ideas and still too exhausted to meet with them. They decided to take their grievances to the C-Star board of directors, but also encountered difficulty in "getting on the agenda." From their perspective, the board appeared unwilling to hear their criticisms and unresponsive to their concerns. According to one board member, the board appointed a committee, in response to the parental complaints, to research and set up a grievance process, but the parents that were delegated this task never followed through. By December, a formal grievance process had not been established, the disgruntled parents were extremely frustrated, and as one mother recalled, "That's when I began to wonder if we had been HAD." Groups of parents began meeting, without Sara, to strategize and vent their concerns.

The lack of a formal grievance procedure, established before the school opened for business, allowed new criticisms to fester

and previous, unsettled concerns to resurface. With energies focused on the classroom, the board of directors and Sara found it difficult to mobilize themselves and other C-Star members to move quickly enough to set up a legitimate grievance process. Mistrust of Sara escalated along with a lack of confidence in the organizational system. Sara, emotionally and physically exhausted from the planning and preparation phases, became frustrated with the parents' unwillingness to leave the staff alone to "do their job".

The criticisms and frustrations that escalated shortly after the opening appeared to color parental opinions about Sara's prior decisions, as well as her motivation for starting the school and overall competence as an educator (Hawkins & Hastie, 1990). Parents and staff members who felt ignored by Sara expressed the belief that C-Star's problems were an inevitable result of Sara's aggressive personality. According to a study of alternative organizations by Joyce Rothschild-Whitt (1976; 1977), established forums for grievances help to maintain the health of a participatory democracy by encouraging and assuring members' input in decision-making and in the evaluation of their leaders. Divisiveness and schism can easily occur within a grass-roots organization where 'empowered' members perceive that their concerns are not being heard (Swidler, 1979).

By the second week of January, the parent community was clearly divided into three camps--those that adamantly supported Sara as the professional in charge, those who were demanding her resignation, and those who were neutral--concerned about her "controlling personality" but not convinced that Sara's resignation was necessary. The parent meetings that were being held in individual homes, without Sara, were emotional and volatile, characterized by raised voices and tears. It was decided, at the suggestion of a neutral parent that a mediator was necessary to assist the C-Star membership through this impasse.

At a parent meeting held at the school in late January, twenty-five parents, all five staff members, and two mediators (professionals from outside the C-Star community) were in

attendance. After an initial "report-back" of the school week's events, the mediators posed three questions to the staff and parents:

1. What do you take pride in or what do you find most inspirational about the school?
2. What's been the most difficult or problematic aspect about your involvement in the school?
3. What would make your experience, or your child's experience, at the school better?

Participants were asked to limit their answers to one sentence per question and to record these on individual pieces of paper distributed by the mediators. All participants then read their responses to the whole group. In answering the first question, the majority of parents and staff voiced similar statements that expressed the excitement or happiness they initially experienced about joining together to organize a new school for their children that would have a creative curriculum and a non-competitive, community focus. Common terms used in their answers were: "collective vision," "creative vision," "new vision," "envisioning together," "building a new community," and "collective work." The primary problems that emerged in answers to the final two questions were: organizational structure (either confusion as to what the existing structure was or dissatisfaction with what it was perceived to be), discipline in the classroom and classroom environment, and communication. Negative comments specifically directed toward Sara were minimal, balanced by an equal number of positive comments about her job performance. At the end of the meeting the following decisions were made and special tasks assigned:

1. A Think Tank was formed to brainstorm and submit suggestions on modifying the organizational structure.

2. A discipline committee was formed to research how schools similar to C-Star deal with discipline in the classroom.
3. Regular scheduled reports (from committee, staff, and board meetings) would be placed in parent folders weekly, to be picked up by parents every Friday.
4. A C-Star community-wide meeting focusing on curriculum development would be organized and scheduled.
5. A list of working committees and their missions would be composed and made available to parents.
6. A parent contract that outlines parental obligations to the school would be created.

In the month following this meeting many of the important tasks that had been assigned were underway--the Think Tank drafted a proposal on organizational structure, numerous detailed reports were being generated and made available for parents by the staff and board, and the issue of classroom discipline was being discussed publicly. This work, however, did not seem to ease the dissension and, in fact, during the month of February the mistrust between the different camps appeared to escalate.

By the second week of March, neither the C-Star board nor the parent community had made any major decisions. Sara was taking Fridays off from the classroom, by order of her doctor, due to "extreme stress and fatigue" and Jill (the art teacher) was still waiting for a ruling from the board of directors on the hierarchical structure of the staff. The frustration of the adults was now, according to parent volunteers and the staff themselves, "being felt by the children in the classrooms." Some parents were researching other schools and preparing to remove their children from C-Star if Sara's powerful position in the organization and/or her presence in the classroom continued.

Discussion

An interesting fact to note in the C-Star case study is that serious attention to issues of governance on the part of the

parents did not occur until the children actually started attending the school. Parents had questions and concerns during the planning stage, but their involvement appears peripheral to Sara's work in establishing the school. Research on Sara's qualifications or background was not conducted nor was there extensive group discussion on C-Star's proposed governance structure. The nuts-and-bolts work of securing the necessary signatures in the district, lobbying school board members, and researching the legal issues of charter schools was accomplished or directed by Sara. It appears that many parents, during the planning phase, were exhibiting signs of "social loafing" (Latane, Williams, & Harkins in Hill, 1992, p. 531) by their passive acceptance of events and their lack of knowledge of and/or engagement in the charter organization process. Looking back on the process, one of Sara's supporters argued:

> People didn't only just TRUST Sara, they also let her do ninety percent of the work. They weren't really asking for a way to do more. Most were just tagging along.

After operations began, the reality of a non-traditional educational philosophy was much different than parents had envisioned. The curriculum philosophy that Sara proposed for the school emphasized "emergent curriculum" which means that teachers propose general educational objectives, but do not establish in advance specific goals for each project and activity (Reggio Emilia exhibit, March 18, 1994). The teachers formulate hypotheses based on previous experience and adapt proposed objectives to the needs and interests of the children. In actually observing this process in the classrooms, the parents were disturbed by the lack of traditional academic structure and began to ask, "What IS the plan here?" As many educational researchers (Tyack & Cuban, 1996; Sarason, 1996; Apple, 1996) have argued, when the process of schooling departs too much from the internalized norm of a "real school," school reforms fall into question.

It is critical that teachers working together "be prepared to discuss the meaning of the ideas and principles underlying their innovations in order to establish, among other things, that they are at least talking about the same thing" (Nicholls, 1983, p.75). In the case of charter schools, the data suggests that these discussions include the parents. Joe Nathan from the Center for School Change at University of Minnesota, argues that it is imperative that charter school teachers and administrators inform parents, consistently and thoroughly, about what the school is doing and what their kids are learning::

> If (parents) do not understand, they will question, complain and make bigtime trouble. This is their right. You can head this off by helping parents understand what your notion of learning is and by constantly sharing what's going on. (p. 5,6)

Conclusion

The fact that so many C-Star parents felt "desperate" about their children having to enter the public school system is not an isolated occurrence and is not restricted to the political right or left. Parents need to realize, however, that charter schools offer a distinct model of school choice and may not be the solution to their problem of finding an alternative. Joining a charter school is not the same as enrolling a child in a traditional public school. Volunteer hours may be long and the process should not be entered into lightly.

Thorough research into the background of educators organizing charter schools is another crucial matter. As mentioned previously, several C-Star parents expressed that they had doubts about their educational leader from the very beginning, but did not pursue a background check. Others that uncovered information that disturbed them, enrolled their children anyway. Unless parents take responsibility for making crucial organizational decisions and pay close attention during the early stages of the planning process, they can end up like some of the C-Star parents

--withdrawing their children in the first year of operation and moving back to square one looking for alternatives.

As the interpersonal strife escalated at C-Star, external concerns such as fundraising and school district accountability deadlines were tabled. According to Ann Arnett Ferguson's thesis (cited in Burawoy, 1991) on the collective organization of workers, the solutions to external pressures--such as those imposed by the school district regulations--are dependent on the mobilization of the energies of the organization's membership. The school district and the traditional public educational system served as entities to mobilize against in the planning and preparation stages, and they provided motivation for the group to overcome incredible obstacles (such as transforming a damp, dreary, construction site into a bright, safe space for children in one month.) However, once the school doors opened, the focus shifted to the daily work of the teachers and administrators in the classrooms. If sufficient mechanisms are not available before a charter school is in operation "for bringing disagreements out into the open, for forging consensus, and for enforcing the collective mandate" (Swidler, p. 92) in personnel and classroom issues, the group could find itself lacking the energy to tackle the external pressures which would seriously impact the longevity of the organization.

Because the education and well-being of one's own child is a very personal and affect-laden issue for parents, it can be assumed that there will be a high degree of emotion involved in making decisions that implicate these vital interests. This emotional involvement is cited by some school officials and educators as one of the major reasons why parents should not be directly involved in developing educational policy. But according to psychologists Lerner and Tetlock (1994) there is considerable evidence that people, in response to situational demand, can shift from simpler, 'shoot-from-the-hip' methods of decision-making to more complex cognitive strategies. Therefore it could be possible for parents and other non-professional policy-makers in the community to learn strategies for making good organizational and

educational decisions for their local school. Dawes (1988) suggests, "Adding, keeping track, and writing down the rules of probabilistic inference explicitly could be of great help in overcoming the systematic errors introduced by representative thinking and availability and other biases" (p. 143). A hurdle to overcome in grass-roots organizing, however, "may be the difficulty of convincing ourselves that we should take precautions against ourselves" during the early planning stages of the process (p. 143).

Notes

1. Names of C-Star parents, staff, and students are pseudonyms.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Guide for Staff

1. What is your professional background?
2. When and why did you become involved in C-Star?
3. Did you have any prior experience or knowledge of charter schools before C-Star?
4. What were your expectations?
5. Did you have any reservations?
6. Describe your working relationship with the rest of the staff.
7. How has your relationship changed over time?
8. Describe your relationship or experience with the C-Star board of Directors from the planning phase through the present.
9. Describe your relationship or experience with the C-Star parents from the planning phase through the present.
10. Describe the present working atmosphere at C-Star. Has it changed since September?
11. What do you like best about C-Star?
12. What do you like least about C-Star?
13. In looking back over your participation in the development and operations of C-Star, what would you have done differently?

APPENDIX B

Interview Guide for Parents

1. What is your professional background?
2. Tell me about your family (e.g., number of children; type of household etc.)
3. When and why did you become involved in C-Star?
4. Did you have any prior experience or knowledge of charter schools before your involvement at C-Star?
5. What were your expectations?
6. Did you have any reservations?
7. Describe your relationship to the educational leader when you first became involved in the school.
8. How would you describe your relationship now?
9. Describe your involvement in the school (e.g., How much do you volunteer?)
10. Describe your relationship or experience with the C-Star Board of Directors from the planning phase through the present.
11. Describe your relationship or experience with the other C-Star staff members and parents from the planning phase through the present.
12. Describe the present 'atmosphere' at C-Star. Do you feel comfortable being at the school? Has that changed over time?
13. What do you like best about C-Star?
14. What do you like least about C-Star?

APPENDIX C

Racial composition of C-Star student body

3	African American
2	Chinese American
3	Latino
1	Native American
2	Russian
11	Caucasian
22	Mixed-race
3	Native American/Caucasian
1	Middle Eastern/Caucasian
6	African American/Caucasian
1	Indonesian/Caucasian
1	Native American/Caucasian/African American/Filipino
1	Caucasian/Chinese
1	Native American/Caucasian/Latino
6	Latino/Caucasian
2	Japanese/Caucasian
44	TOTAL

Parents as partners in the organization and development of charter schools

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Abstract

This case study investigates the beginning stages, from initial planning through the first seven months of operation, of a small, parent-run, "new-start" charter school (hereafter referred to as C-Star) located in a residential neighborhood of a California urban metropolis. The focus is on the parents as integral players in the founding, development, and operations of the K-1 charter school and the evolution of their working relationship with the school's chief administrator.

Although the characteristics of individual charter schools vary considerably, a factor that is consistent in the overall movement is the promotion of parent participation in the organizational structure and governance of the schools. For example, in California's Senate Bill No. 1448 (1992), the chapter detailing the petition process for charter organizers states that all petitions must contain a description of the governance structure of the proposed charter school that includes, but is not limited to "the process to be followed by the school to ensure parental involvement" (p. 4). In a 1994 charter school study conducted by Southwest Regional Laboratory, twenty-five out of thirty-four California charter schools (converted and new-start schools) reported that parents had more influence than in traditional schools in their district. Seventy-four percent of the charter schools used parents as instructors and over half (56%) reported that parents were required to participate in specified school activities or volunteer for a certain number of hours. In new-start schools, seven of eight reported that parents were heavily involved in educational programming and in five of the eight, parents were directly involved in the development of the charter petitions (Dianda & Corwin, 1994).

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This empowerment of parents to select their public school of choice and the opportunity to play an integral role in the organizational structure of their school opens the door to a number of questions. What effect will direct accountability between parent and local school have on the professional educators responsible for the daily operations of a school? What effect will parents' empowerment in the educational process have on their own daily lives; for example, what responsibilities and how much time will parents have to factor into their participation? How will the inclusion of parents in the organizational fabric of a school affect the implementation and management of educational innovations?

The paper begins with a brief overview of charter schools, nationally and in the state of California, to place C-Star's experience in context. An analysis of the parents' motivation for joining together to found the school, their relationship with the educational leader (principal/head teacher), and the role played by the local school district in the process follows. To broaden the scope of C-Star's findings to the overall charter school movement, implications for parents and educators involved in the grass-roots organization of new-start schools concludes the discussion.

The data utilized in this paper was collected over a period of seven months and consisted of interviews with parents and staff, observations of parent and staff meetings, classroom observations, and historical documents (news articles, charter petition and bylaws, meeting minutes, correspondence, etc.) The approach to the analysis was "recursively sequential" (Smith, 1992), that is, themes and patterns that emerged during initial interviews and observations influenced the steps that followed. The information from initial interviews and observations was the basis for selecting informants for formal interviewing and influenced the types of questions asked. All interviews were transcribed and analyzed with an inductive cross-case method of analysis. Key

topics, words, and events were identified and coded, such as (a) parents motivation for becoming involved with the charter school group; (b) trust; (c) charter petition process; and so forth. A timeline was then constructed to identify turning points, benchmarks, and transitions in staff's and parents' feelings and opinions that occurred from the initial planning phase into the first year of operation. Meeting minutes, parents' notes, and newspaper articles that documented events prior to the researcher's entrance to the site were used in addition to informants' interviews to construct the timeline.

Insights and conclusions were shared with informants, other researchers studying charter schools, and with outside individuals involved in the grass roots organization of non-profits, collectives, and other alternative schools. This was an on-going process that helped in the verification of interpretations and conclusions and offered insight into 'where to go next' in the investigative process.

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